

Age has no hold on ex-champ Thesz

Chad -
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No article appeared on
Xmas Day (Tuesday). This
one did appear a day
after New Years (Wednesday).

On the surface, the idea of a 74-year-old man wrestling sounds preposterous. But not to Lou Thesz. Thesz became the first pro wrestler active in seven decades when he wrestled live on a Japanese network television special Dec. 26.

Thesz, who runs a wrestling school in Norfolk, Va., started wrestling professionally in 1935. He was both the youngest (21 in 1937) and oldest (50 in 1966) man to hold the National Wrestling Alliance world heavy-weight title, and he was recognized almost universally as world champ when pro wrestling hit it big on television in the early '50s.

In those days, pro wrestling wasn't as well-controlled as it is today. As champion, Thesz wrestled for different promoters all over the world. And, though a champion had to be able to draw fans to the matches, he also had to be well-respected and tough enough that nobody would dare try a double-cross.

In his heyday, Thesz was so confident of his wrestling ability that he routinely accepted challenges for gymnasium "sparring sessions" from amateur champs and others who believed he wasn't the real deal.

But one challenge stood out. It was in Houston in the early '40s, and Thesz doesn't even remember the name of his opponent. But when Thesz saw who had made the challenge, he nearly burst out laughing. The man was 60 years old. But much to Thesz's shock, the man gave the champ a rough time, and Thesz had to use a double-wrist-lock submission, a maneuver with which amateurs were not familiar, to do in the man more than 30 years his senior.

Right then and there, Thesz said, he discovered that if he never stopped working out, his skills would last until he was at least 60. Indeed, when Thesz won the NWA title for the final time when he was 47, it was because promoters were looking for a real deal rather than a drawing card.

It was 1963, and Buddy Rogers was recognized as world champ. It was no secret that Vince McMahon Sr., father of today's wrestling czar, was going to pull out of the NWA and form his own organization (which evolved into today's World Wrestling Federation) and that Rogers was going with him.

Just before Rogers was going to make the jump, NWA officials arranged a match with Thesz in Toronto. Rogers wasn't aware of what was about to transpire until he got into the ring. Wrestling lore has it that Thesz told Rogers that they could do it the hard way or the easy way.

Rogers chose the easy way.

Pro wrestling became a television phenomenon in Japan in the late '50s, and Thesz was the first American champ to defend the title there.

In September, he visited Japan and the idea of his coming back in a tag-team match was suggested. He agreed, but only if it would be a singles match. Thesz lost the match, last Wednesday night to Masa Chono, a man nearly 50 years younger.

Grunt and Grin will resume appearing on Tuesday next week.



**GRUNT
AND
GRIN**

BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL